

One Voice

By Gillian Dooley

Pre-print of article published in the *Adelaide Review* March 2010.

I admit it: I'm a chorister. Have been (on and off) since childhood. But in Adelaide that doesn't make me anything special. I only have to mention the fact to someone and they'll tell me their wife, brother, daughter or best friend is in a choir, and it's often one I've never heard of. Adelaide's choral scene is booming.

On 13 March in the Entertainment Centre, Adelaide's choristers will in fact be making an unusual amount of noise. Mahler's 8th Symphony requires not just two symphony orchestras, a pipe organ and 8 soloists, but a massed choir. About 400 singers aged between 8 and 80 will be taking part. Some are coming from interstate, but at least three-quarters are from South Australia.

A work on this scale is a once-in-a-generation event: it was last performed in Adelaide in 1968 under Henry Krips. As it is well beyond the resources of even Adelaide's largest choirs, eight Adelaide choirs and four interstate choirs are participating. The organisation of an event on this scale is an immense undertaking, and the management of the chorus has been entrusted to Edward Joyner, Adelaide Chamber Singers' Administrator. Ed is there at every rehearsal, making sure we have all the information we need, that the rehearsal spaces are booked, that we all have our scores and one of the team of accompanists and conductors to take the rehearsal. And on top of that, he organised a contingent from the choir to go to Sydney and perform the symphony under Vladimir Ashkenazy in February.

There is a team of conductors and pianists: the choir has to rehearse in up to four sections when first learning a piece of this scale and complexity. Carl Crossin is Chorus Director, and his conducting team includes Leonie Hempton, Christie Anderson, Emma Horwood and Aldis Sils, all experienced choral conductors. Jamie Cock is Principal Repetiteur – a mind-boggling job, playing a reduction of this huge complex orchestral score to give the singers an idea of what we'll be hearing when we finally, a couple of days before the performance, get to rehearse with the orchestra.

Crossin is the Director of the Elder Conservatorium, and runs the choral program there. Widely regarded as one of Australia's foremost choral conductors, he started as a rock musician and trained as a classical guitarist at the Sydney Conservatorium in the days before choral conducting was offered. Although formal training is now available, Australia, unlike Europe and the USA, still doesn't really have a professional career path for choral conductors, without the institutions in place to support them. Successful choral conductors have to make their own opportunities – to develop vocal ensembles, as he has done with the Adelaide Chamber Singers. He has also built up the choral program at the Elder Con, and there are now seven choirs based there including the Elder Conservatorium Chorale, which is participating in the Mahler. A few of these choristers will join the ranks of Australia's professional (or semi-professional) ensemble singers,

but, as Crossin acknowledges, 'without a healthy, energised choral scene, nothing else exists. The emerging professional choral scene sits on a strong amateur foundation.'

This foundation is diverse, with choirs of all sizes and age groups, and with a variety of missions. Many conductors direct more than one choir. Lesley Lewis, well known to baroque devotees as one of Adelaide's pre-eminent keyboard players, conducts three choirs: the Hills Choral Society, a medium-sized community choir based in the Adelaide Hills, the church choir at St Michael's, Mitcham, and the unique Quire St Nicolas, an Anglican service choir which is not based at any church but makes itself available to provide sung liturgy for churches when no regular choir is available.

Belonging to any choir is regular commitment, but it takes extra devotion to sing in a church choir twice every Sunday, and perhaps that is the reason why church choirs are less plentiful than they were. However, secular choirs and smaller ensembles seem to be proliferating. Some are professional, in the sense of receiving some payment for their services (and this sector seems to be reviving somewhat after the blow dealt by the controversial axeing of the ABC Adelaide Singers in 1976). Most, though, are amateur, though many aspire to high standards. One such choir is Graduate Singers, conducted by Timothy Marks, who also directs the Australian Youth Choir and pop music ensemble In Unitate. Marks believes in developing the choral skills of his singers. Soon after taking over the musical direction of the choir ten years ago he dispensed with regular piano accompaniment at rehearsals, throwing choristers back on their own musical ears and sight-reading abilities. The review of Graduate Singers' 2009 Christmas concert testifies to his success: Marks 'has moulded veterans and a goodly bunch of younger voices into a balanced, disciplined unit,' according to Elizabeth Silsbury.

I asked both Lewis and Marks what makes a good chorister, and their replies were revealing. They both listed love of music, passion for singing, commitment to teamwork, flexibility and willingness to blend with the group, above skills like sight-reading and particular vocal gifts.

In 2009 three choirs, Graduate Singers, Corinthian Singers and Adelaide Philharmonia Chorus, joined together to form the Adelaide Symphony Chorus for a gala performance of Handel's *Messiah*. For the *Advertiser's* reviewer 'The standout success was undoubtedly the brilliant chorus work'. Every one of those choristers devoted hours of their spare time to preparing for that performance. We are now doing it again for the Mahler. We do it for the challenge of learning a difficult work, for the thrill of performing under a great conductor with a great orchestra. For the love of singing.